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## Strategy for Seeing White: Patricia Williams's Polar Bears

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## A Strategy for Seeing White: Reading Patricia Williams' Polar Bears

I used to believe that one could and should read books written by people from a variety of cultures and ethnic groups but that one could not presume to write about such texts since writing necessitates interpreting and theorizing. I would not impose white ideologies, however unwittingly, on the fictions of Gayl Jones or Zoe Wicomb. This deference, I now believe, has turned reading into voyeurism. Although I do not have the Laguna reader's response to Tayo in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*, I can know the response of my white racial self if I work to define what that whiteness and that self are. I want to take stock of a white self and, as a black activist once put it to me, take responsibility for "my own people." To do this, I hypothesize, one must cling tenaciously to the atrocities of history and to the beauties of land and art while wrestling whiteness—European peoples and cultures and their descendants around the globe—from the self-perpetuated assumptions of superiority and entitlement.<sup>1</sup> These assumptions, enacted by the power of wealth and military will, have enabled the further assumptions that white cultures are normative and, thus, capable of asserting themselves as arbiters of what is universal for humanity. It is possible, or, at least, it is necessary, to decenter one's vision in order to see whiteness not as norm but as a racial trope among tropes, a social construction among constructions.<sup>2</sup>

The various ideologies of western civilization—colonialism, imperialism, racism, capitalism, Marxism, Freudianism—have placed whites at the core or the top of their ideological constructs. This maneuver has certainly given the impression that whiteness is a norm but that assertion is a prototrope, parent to the tropes of racial definition disseminated in the West. And like all implicit assumptions successfully disseminated, it has accrued considerable power, much of it employed in horrendous projects. A part of the legacy left to the white reader, then, is this trail of tears and a set of assumptions only partially acknowledged. This legacy is the badge of insult whites wear.

Kwame Anthony Appiah speaks of blackness as a badge of insult the African or African-American cannot escape. That is to say, the history of how blackness has been defined and degraded lives on the surface of the skin (35). Whites, too, wear a badge of insult, a history fraught with degrading treatment of other peoples. Whites can, of course, use the badge as a shield fortified by the prototrope of the white norm. That shield of majority status and normative knowing can protect whites from seeing how they are seen. Whites who choose this shield may defend the racial attitudes I am calling racisms, but the white badge of insult on their skin is nonetheless visible to others. I am not suggesting that the kind of suffering by blacks signified by the black badge of insult has been or is experienced by those who wear the white badge of insult. But I am suggesting that all so-called races—whites included—wear a badge of insult racially determined and historically constructed.

Families stubbornly and confusedly pass on these public insults generation after generation. A white badge is, in part, defined for me by those moments in my childhood when, confronted by the chaos of crime and world conflict on the evening news, my father would say, "Hitler was right. We should line them up and shoot them." My father's words are the surface of my skin, that racial sign that those not white have learned to distrust. Although I want to use my words to shed that skin, those other words, I cannot. I wear them everywhere I go. They are the badge of whiteness others see.

But saying this does not elicit a full and paradoxical enough definition of whiteness to produce useful dialogue in an interracial world. Definitions of whiteness need to expose the prototrope of the white norm because, whether in the texts of whites or blacks or other races, the assumed facticity of a white norm promotes dichotomous thinking about racial difference: all "others" appear in relief against a blank, white, unyielding wall. People of a variety of racial identities, including some who promote white supremacy and others who oppose it, depend for their arguments on this static construction of whiteness. An emphasis on whiteness qua whiteness, in its complexity, does not, in contrast, bury the history of racisms and oppressions so newly excavated. On the contrary, it removes the veneer of excusability from white history provided by the prototrope of the white norm. Just as the Sioux must continue to resist the stereotype of the doomed primitive which circumscribes their future, whites must resist the stereotype of the white norm which seeks to perpetuate their complicity in a future of racial dominance and conflict. Until whites find definitions of their racial selves resistant to the assumed normative status quo that has historically and culturally evolved, they are destined to an invisibility within the dominance of their own racial group.<sup>3</sup> Some whites, I believe, experience the pain of the white badge

we wear but see the continued power of the prototrope of normative whiteness and so feel disempowered. And yet I suspect we will not find the power to resist our normative status in a ventriloquism that gives a Laguna voice to a white face nor in a voyeurism that watches and waits. Making no claims for the pain of our racial identities other than that it is ours, I think we had better examine it.

One strategy for making explicit a racial identity so implicit is to read and listen to the definitions of whiteness employed by people with other racial identities for whom whiteness is less likely to be normative or implicit. Looking for books entitled *The White Image in the Black Mind* or *White Skin, Black Masks*, I read George Fredrickson's *The Black Image in the White Mind* or Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*. Although historian George Fredrickson writes of *The Black Image in the White Mind*, he contributes to my understanding of what I will call white consciousness by adding credence to the premise that whites' ideas about themselves, often projected through ideas about others, are at the core of racial conflict, at least within the United States.<sup>4</sup> Evidence supporting this premise appears, for example, when he speaks of the waning colonization movement in the northern United States of the 1830s. (The colonization movement sought the removal of Negroes from slavery and from the United States and their establishment in a colony such as Liberia or sites in Central and South America.)

Fredrickson writes,

The controversy that then erupted in Northern reform circles was not, as is sometimes supposed, a dispute over the inherent capabilities of the Negro; as we have seen, prominent advocates of colonization often shared, in theory at least, the abolitionist belief that American Negro deficiencies were the result of a repressive environment. Rather it was a debate on the separate issue of whether white Americans could be expected to overcome their antipathy to blacks and achieve interracial equality and brotherhood. (28)

United States writers who are defined as ethnic minorities by their appearance or language or habits of being and who define themselves by actively speaking from and about that ethnic or minority identification enable a white reader to see her whiteness—its political and economic dominance, its inherent claims to normative judgments—being seen. Although these constructions of whiteness are not without their own instances of and reasons for stereotyping and hyperbole, they nonetheless provide the reader images and ideas of whiteness visible as such because removed from normative status.

Attorney Patricia Williams is one such writer. In her self-reflective, innovative, legal analysis, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*, she weaves a web of logic and logic outré around the subjects of race and rights.

Williams' interest in whiteness is not pointed nor her examination of it systematic; the ambiguities of her text are all the more provocative. For they offer to the reader, as a medium of exchange, diverse and paradoxical emotions and ideas of a person experienced in the ways of a race-conscious society. Both the collage form and the diverse contents of Williams' book announce that race and rights are a complex, convoluted topic. Williams' treatment of this difficult topic demands that her text be closely read rather than categorized.

Specifically, in Williams' chapter, "On Being the Object of Property (a gift of intelligent rage)," she creates meaning through juxtapositions of different examples or anecdotes which range in purview from intimacy to legality. The effect—indeed, I suspect, the aim—of this process is to remove the distinction between what is private and what is public and thus to undermine the dispassionate objectivity claimed by the law and legal analyses. "On Being the Object of Property" begins with a story of Williams' departure for law school and her mother's reminder that "The Millers were lawyers, so you have it in your blood" (216). But legacies are troubling. Austin Miller was the slaveholder who owned and impregnated Williams' great-great-grandmother. Williams remarks, "Reclaiming that from which one has been disinherited is a good thing. . . . Yet claiming for myself a heritage the weft of whose genesis is my own disinheritance is a profoundly troubling paradox" (217).

From a variety of angles she probes this paradox. After her initial story, she moves to an anecdotal and statistical discussion of the sterilization of black, brown, and red women. She concludes from her information that one legacy for the individual from slavery "is a belief structure rooted in a concept of black (or brown or red) antiwill" (219) and supposing "pure will" as nobility in a white person. She explains then that "pure will" signifies the whole personality in the bourgeois world view while "wisdom, control, and aesthetic beauty signify the whole white personality" in slave law (221). It is apparently the "pure will" of white nobility Williams' mother tells her to draw forth from her Miller blood, a will very useful in law school. But instead Williams finds, in her search for her roots, that she is the "irrationality, lack of control, and ugliness" of the whole slave or black personality as seen by the white slaveholder (221). Knowing, *saying*, that the ideologies of slavery and bourgeois life are fragmenting and fragmented does not spare Williams this absorption of the slave personality. She seems to be exhibiting black antiwill.

Like the illiterate, pregnant, fifteen-year-old black girl whose mother recommends sterilization which had been suggested to her by a white doctor, Williams does not like to look white people in the eye. Williams' parents recommend to her that she do look all people in the eye, and thus they pass on the knowledge of the norms of "this culture." But, for

Williams, such looking “rewounds, relives the early childhood anguish of uncensored seeing, the fullness of vision that is the permanent turning-away point for most blacks” (222). This statement leaves ambiguous to whose “uncensored seeing” it refers. On the one hand, whites’ seeing Williams’ “ugliness” as they have been taught to see it would logically result in her turning away from the whites’ gaze. On the other hand, her seeing that “white people see all the worlds beyond me but not me” (222), *her* seeing that whites are not seeing, might logically result also in a turning away but not because she has seen registered on the white face black ugliness. She inserts the learned image in the absence of any other while the whites trot by “with force and speed,” in other words, exercising “pure will.” Her turning away is not, however, antiwill; it is willed. But she fears her will to blindness “neutralizes” and “sterilizes” important parts of her self. And so, for the rest of the chapter, in her own way, in order to keep her vulnerability and her insight intact, she looks into the face of whiteness.

Williams’ reticent gaze into the eyes of whites devolves from an on-again/off-again story about Marjorie, her godmother, whose light-skinned mother left her dark daughter with relatives so that she, the mother, could “pass” and marry a white man. After the death of the wealthy white husband, Marjorie’s mother “rejoin[s] the race, as the royalty of resentful fascination” (223).

These stories provoke a rumination on commercial transactions and contract law, Williams’ professional expertise. She notes that contract law renders a contract’s signatories passive, granting only the document the power to act. The signatories, it would seem, are in the state of antiwill assumed of slaves while the contract acts paternally. Williams offers as an example the contract entered into by Mary Beth Whitehead, mother of so-called Baby M.

Williams concludes that Whitehead’s powerlessness in relation to the contract and Williams’ own great-grandmother’s powerlessness under the slaveholder’s contract are analogous and that she, Williams, and Sara Melissa Stern Whitehead (Baby M.) share a similar fortune of social positioning (226). While I see a greater distinction than does Williams between having a choice to sign a contract and not, I also see that from the descendants’ point of view the law’s power to decide who will raise a child is a denial of flesh and blood, a locking it away in word vaults, as Williams puts it (226). Not only are browner children denied of lighter parents by the courts or by those parents themselves and mothers denied power over the children of their flesh, as Williams explains, but the descendants of Williams’ great-grandfather, the white lawyer, are also denied the inheritance of his flesh and blood and “pure will.”

Judge Sorkow who delivered the decision in the Baby M. case provides the reasoning behind these denials. Sorkow supposes in his opinion “that

it is natural for people to want children ‘like’ themselves” (226). In response, Williams suggests that the image of a white mother suckling a black child, perceived most often as “unseemly,” “places the hope of continuous generation, of immortality of the white self, in a little black face” (227). Rather than “pure will” and indifference, she imagines the possibility of seeing within a generous white self a black face. This white image in a black mind is not simply a black mask on white skin; it is an image of genuine personal and public history in the flesh. That is to say that the brown child does live in many white bodies; the white child, in many brown bodies.

Images seen (because one, after all, must look), images gleaned from experience lived and stories told, reside at the center, beginning, and end of Williams’ rhetoric about rights. She argues,

Rights contain images of power, and manipulating those images, either visually or linguistically, is central in the making and maintenance of rights. In principle, therefore, the more dizzyingly diverse the images that are propagated, the more empowered we will be as a society. (234)

In Williams’ work details of particular stories and images are material to exchange with other storytellers and other seers.

So Williams returns to stories and to Marjorie, a storyteller herself. Pressed by Williams to tell about her childhood, the dark-skinned Marjorie tells only “about a child who wandered into a world of polar bears, . . . and was in the end eaten” (228). But, she insists, “In the polar bear universe . . . the primary object of creation was polar bears.” Clouds, trees, humans, everything was designed to serve polar bears. “The child’s life was not in vain because the polar bears had been made holy by its suffering. The child had been a test, a message from god for polar bears” (228). Williams’ paradox-laden response to this ambiguous allegory is laughter, a call for truth, and acquiescence “to the emptiness of words” (228), all while she continues to eat her godmother’s food: “the voracity of [Marjorie’s] amnesia would disclaim and disclaim—and she would go on telling me about the polar bears until our plates were full of emptiness and I became large in the space that described her emptiness and I gave in to the emptiness of words” (228). Full of the food of assimilated America—canned fruit, roasts, vanilla pudding, Sprite—served by a god-mother once cast off by a light-skinned mother, Williams swells to fill the space left vacant by Marjorie’s amnesia. The amnesia is a kind of antiwill, a self-abnegation, and yet it is voracious and persuasive: “I gave in to the emptiness of words” (228). Is the voracity the force only of polar bear (white) privilege in a polar bear (white) universe, or is it a force of Marjorie’s storytelling, a force perhaps great enough to turn voracity into

veracity if one knew how to see, listen, read? In fact, are the polar bears of Marjorie's story even analogous to white people or white power? Are the humans of her story the People, that is, specifically *her* ethnic people, or are they a universal humankind?

Williams complicates any truth value inherent in Marjorie's story by juxtaposing to it words that construct more paradox. After describing herself as becoming large in the space of her godmother's emptiness, Williams describes her emotions on days when she feels invisible and manipulated. She disassembles and must stare herself down in a mirror to remake herself whole. She must again face looking in order to see, but she can find her own reflection in no face but her own. And yet this description is followed by the narrative of Marjorie's stroke, Williams' visits to the hospital room, and the need to mirror Marjorie's earlier treatment of her goddaughter:

My feeding the one who had so often fed me became a complex ritual of mirroring and self-assembly. . . . I bent down to give meaning to her silence, her wandering search for words. . . . I told her stories to fill the emptiness. (229)

As the caretaker, Williams finds that the responsibility of self-assembly—feeding, story-telling, filling emptiness—devolves on her. But Marjorie, devoid of words, is dying. The only self assembled by Williams' stories is her own; the method of her assembly is the mirroring of the godmother of seeming amnesia, emptiness, and antiwill.

Marjorie has bequeathed the polar-bear allegory to Williams, who, in turn, tells her readers (of whatever color). By relating the story to us, she is offering to exchange experiences and thereby create, perhaps, a community. In fact, the last story she tells her godmother is one of exchange, a circle of barter in a neighborhood where she learned a way to value herself. "Cradled in this community whose currency was a relational ethic, my stock in myself soared. My value depended on the glorious intangibility, the eloquent invisibility, of my just being part of the collective" (230). Even in a national or global community too large for exchanging driving lessons for a hand-knit sweater, Williams implies that we can exchange experiences through stories. Nothing in Williams implies that the exchange, finally, cannot be among diverse races. But she does clearly state that the images shared must be "dizzily diverse" in order to empower society in all its nonnormative parts, and this means looking into faces whose hostility or indifference or difference disassembles the features we had found familiar on our own faces.

Williams returns, then, to an image of polar bears and a brown child, race and rights. She recalls a story and a photograph from the New York newspapers about an eleven-year-old boy, child of a recently dead

Hispanic alcoholic father and a black welfare mother, and the polar bears at the Brooklyn Zoo. Having broken into the zoo after hours with some friends, the boy entered the polar bears' cage to swim in the moat. The bears mauled the boy to death. After the boy was dead, the police arrived; they shot and killed the bears. A photographer was there to capture the scene of the police shooting through three levels of bars at what Williams calls "a pietà of bears" (234). This event, resulting at the time in a cacophony of protest, advice, and arguments about rights, is further complicated by its placement in a chapter with Marjorie's story. What is the white image in the black mind that these stories convey?

Although these whirling images do not stop for a fixed meaning, Williams offers two kinds of commentary on the polar-bear stories. One is an anecdote; the others are paradoxical lyricisms. The anecdote is about a group of prepubescent white boys enrolled at Dartmouth in a summer basketball camp, traveling in "platoons" of 25 or so and headed toward Williams on a sidewalk. Her good-humored description of them conjures up bear imagery—"big-footed, with fuzzy yellow crewcuts, loping" (235); nevertheless, indifferent to her, they jostle her "into the gutter" (235). Her yelling at them only solidifies their group in polite distance.

The two ambiguous lyrical passages I should quote in full so as not unduly to blunt their nuance. The first precedes the story of the Brooklyn Zoo.

In reality, it was a lovely polar-bear afternoon. The gentle force of the earth. A wide wilderness of islands. A conspiracy of polar bears lost in timeless forgetting. A gentleness of polar bears, a fruitfulness of polar bears, a silent black-eyed interest of polar bears, a bristled expectancy of polar bears. With the wisdom of innocence, a child threw stones at the polar bears. Hungry in nests, they rose, inquisitive, dark-souled, patient with foreboding, fearful in tremendous awakening. The instinctual ferocity of the hunter reflected upon the hunted. Then, proud teeth and warrior claws took innocence for wilderness and raging insubstantiality for tender rabbit breath. (234)

Most salient in this first passage are the contradictory words used to describe the bears: "gentleness" yet "conspiracy." But then one notices that it is more the place and the times that are "lovely," "wide," and "gentle" than the bears themselves. The bears conspire together in timeless forgetting so that the afternoon seems only lovely and they, only a "gentle force of the earth." But even before the child throws the stone, they are "silent," staring, "bristled" with expectancy. After the child throws the stone, they rise and their behavior becomes increasingly forbidding. They are "fearful in tremendous awakening." The child's stone has exposed the conspiracy of gentleness and awakened fear which manifests itself as the hunter seeing his own ferocity in the hunted. This is how Williams imag-

ines the confrontation between bears and boy before the police and reporters arrived.

When the police, "helpless" and "desperate," shoot the bears and the photographers capture the image of paths for newspaper readers, these guardians of law and a free press truncate the "tremendous awakening" of the bears. The image given to the public to read in the photograph of the bear pieta perpetuates the conspiracy of gentleness. The polar bear (white) world is insulated, pretty, and predicated on a hunter's violence made to look like the paths of the prey.

That the bears were, in fact, bears and incapable of conspiracy and that they were caged only heightens the force of the metaphor. In Brooklyn polar bears have power only within their cage and only if men with guns are not outside their cage. Since they are fed in the zoo, their hunting "instinct" can only be some faint echo of its former call. Their zookeepers have also imposed on the bears "timeless forgetting" in order that they not remember freedom. The purpose of these bears with the beautiful white skins is to be on display representing some lovely, gentle, wide world which they never actually had and cannot remember. The boy's presence in their cage, inside the bars, is as close an approximation of the wide world as they have had since they were bred or captured. And so they respond "fearful in tremendous awakening."

The boy apparently believed in the pastoral world represented by the bears in their cage. He must have. He must have believed the bears would share their moat, incredible as that seems. In *her* story Marjorie imagines that the eaten child is a sacrifice that made the polar bears holy, and the Brooklyn boy's death did result in the photograph of a bear pieta. It seems Marjorie may have been right, but only if one thinks of holiness as an appearance of gentle innocence created by a good press agent. These big white creatures are not holy or unholy. They are caged and befuddled. They die not innocent but ignorant. Believing our cage is a world and our whiteness the norm, those of us white creatures capable of conspiracy and active amnesia may find ourselves at a similar end.

In the final passage, freed from the crew-cut boys, Williams muses on an uncertain future. This second passage follows the story of Dartmouth and ends the chapter.

I put distance between them and me, gave myself over to polar-bear musing. I allowed myself to be watched over by bear spirits. Clean white wind and strong bear smells. The shadowed amnesia; the absence of being; the presence of polar bears. White wilderness of icy meateaters heavy with remembrance; leaden with undoing; shaggy with the effort of hunting for silence; frozen in a web of intention and intuition. A lunacy of polar bears. A history of polar bears. A pride of polar bears. A consistency of polar bears. In those mean-

dering pastel polar-bear moments, I found cool fragments of white-fur invisibility. Solid, black-gummed, intent, observant. Hungry and patient, impassive and exquisitely timed. The brilliant bursts of exclusive territoriality. A complexity of messages implied in our being. (236)

"Bear spirits" and "shadowed amnesia" hover around her, the forces of her spiritual mother Marjorie, the white father Austin Miller, the professional world that welcomes her as white, and a history made holy by sacrifice. None of it can be ignored, looked away from. The meateaters of the white wilderness that Williams sees, are "heavy with remembrance" yet "hunting for silence," "frozen in intention." They will even have "brilliant bursts of exclusive territoriality." Nevertheless, the cool wind of bear spirits still blows up "a complexity of messages implied in our being," a human being reducible, finally, to neither pure will nor anti-will. Williams earns this "our" of interracial being by looking the dizzying images in the eye. This process provides the white reader an array of white images in the black mind generously offered in exchange.

The search for nonnormative white consciousness runs a risk of seeming to ignore oppression while ruminating on a more comfortable self. In this regard I am reminded of the elderly white woman in John Coetzee's *Age of Iron*. This aged protagonist can find no right consciousness or good behavior for herself in apartheid South African society. In one scene she drives her maid Florence into the township to find Florence's teenaged son and immerses herself in a world of relentless violence and confusion, a world which she can later leave while its residents cannot. A man, a teacher, goads her into describing her responses to what she is seeing. A crowd forms demanding her response.

"These are terrible sights," I repeated, faltering. "They are to be condemned. But I cannot denounce them in other people's words. I must find my own words, from myself. Otherwise it is not the truth. That is all I can say now."

"This woman talks shit," said a man in the crowd. He looked around. "Shit," he said. No one contradicted him. (98-99)

I, who am of course not white but the color of unroasted almonds, risk the emptiness of words, "talking shit," in order to find images, stories, and ideas that construct a complex white racial self responsible for its history and resistant to entitlement. This resistance cannot occur within a construction of whiteness as the invisible normative non-race or the race of Anglo-Saxon supremacy. If whiteness is self-consciously seen as a race

and white skin as a particular badge others read, if the white *I/i* is fractured,<sup>5</sup> then the burden of racial visibility carried by people designated as red or yellow or brown or black might be shared. I can imagine whites participating in a community of interracial exchange only if we come into this community with an acknowledged racial identity that sees how it is seen—just like everyone else. The knowledge that race is very much the result of history and linguistic formation and very little the result of biology has done little to diminish the significance of race as a marker of identity.<sup>6</sup> White citizens and readers have to join that community of races before they can hope to look others in the face and see not black masks or white, brown, red, or yellow, the badges of insult, but the colors of cinnamon, chickory, almonds, and the tea rose.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Other peoples have also assumed for themselves superiority and entitlement because of caste or color. This is worth noting not as an argument for diminishing and dismissing the particular vanities and villainies of whites in history, but for contextualizing that history. I am chary of the assumption which claims superior evil for satanic white vanity. This assumption retains white people as the principle players. One must, finally, argue particulars: e.g., the European trade in West African slaves, driven by the plantation economy, was different in kind and degree from an earlier Indian trade in East African slaves. And one must, sometimes, concede the uselessness in prioritizing atrocities. To see a single evil, a greatest evil, is to turn one's eyes from another.

<sup>2</sup> In her paper, "Psychoanalysis and Normative Whiteness," delivered at the 1989 MLA convention, Barbara Johnson explored, in a different theoretical frame, the construction of the white norm.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Ondaatje's novel, *In the Skin of a Lion*, provides a vivid image of invisibility. The prisoner Caravaggio escapes undetected by having his friends paint him blue when they are all painting a ceiling blue. "Buck and Patrick painted him, covering his hands and boots and hair with blue. They daubed his clothes and then, laying a strip of handkerchief over his eyes, painted his face blue, so he was gone—to the guards who looked up and saw nothing there" (180). While Caravaggio's taking on the color of the background allows him specifically to escape jail, an analogous white disappearance into the white background permits an escape from any self-consciousness about one's racial identity and how it circumscribes one's own life as well as others'.

<sup>4</sup> Reginald Horsman develops this thesis in his history of the myth of Anglo-Saxonism, *Race and Manifest Destiny*.

<sup>5</sup> Trinh Minh-ha's *I/i* is, of course, the model here.

<sup>6</sup> I agree with Walter Benn Michaels' conclusion to "Race into Culture: A Critical Genealogy of Cultural Identity": "Our sense of culture is characteristically meant to displace race, but part of the argument of this essay has been that cul-

ture has turned out to be a way of continuing rather than repudiating racial thought." I am much less persuaded by some earlier turns in Michaels' argument which elide the role of physical force and law in the processes of assimilation and cultural reformation. But his insistence that race is salient in current debates about multiculturalism which intend most to get beyond it is a useful corrective to the course of that discussion out of which this essay arises.

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